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ABSTRACT

Understanding collaborative writing as a form of networking is useful in that it highlights the fact that composition students do not have the same type of networks or networking skills. Composition assignments should take into account the digital divide and should foster networking across social class divisions because invention is a social act. This will not merely benefit students from working class backgrounds. There is much merit in setting up assignments that offer students the opportunity to collaborate with other students, whose contacts and networks can only extend their combined resources. Composition instructors have a responsibility to design assignments that foster the types of networking and negotiation skills that are rapidly becoming necessary in all facets of the new networked economy. Contains 13 references. (EF)

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by Jennifer Beech

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J. Beech

CS 217 497

"Writing and (Net)Working: Collaboration and Working-Class Students

By: Jennifer Beech

Literacy theorists and sociolinguists have for quite some time found the concept of social *networks* useful for "moving beyond a focus on individuals and individual encounters, towards one which shows how literacy links across people and localities" (Barton and Hamilton 16). Drawing on the work of J. P. Blom and J. Gumperz, Lesley Milroy recounts that much of the earlier sociolinguistic discussions focused on the concept of open and closed networks:

> ...since low-status speakers interact mostly within a defined territory, a give person's contacts will nearly all know each other. The elite...on the other hand had "open" personal networks. They moved...outside territorial boundaries, and a given person's contacts each had his own contacts, none of whom necessarily knew each other. (20)

Milroy adds that more recently, sociolinguists have qualified this conception so that "it is possible for one network to be described as *more* or *less* dense than another, rather than in absolute terms as *open* or *closed*" (20). I want to draw on and to update these notions of networking because I think they can help us to understand collaborative writing as a form of networking and because they highlight the fact that students coming into our composition classrooms do not all possess the same types of networks, nor do they possess the same networking skills.

If we understand networks as Jeremy Rifkin discusses them in *The Age of Access*, we can see now more than any other time in U. S. history the importance of networking to individual success. Rifkin explains:

> The people of the twenty-first century are as likely to perceive themselves as nodes embedded in networks of shared interests as they are to perceive themselves as autonomous agents in a Darwinian world of competitive survival. For them, personal freedom has less to do with the right of possession and the ability to exclude others and more to do with the right to be included in webs of mutual relationships. (12)

Rifkin goes on to assert that in a connected economy, self-interest must give way to connections in networks of "mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships" (19). He quotes Time Warner's Walter Isaacson, who observes, "the old establishment was a club. The new establishment is a network" (qtd. in Rifkin 24).

Rifkin is careful, however, to qualify his enthusiasm for this new age by reminding us of the digital divide that accompanies this historic moment. As compositionists, our assignments need to take into account and attempt to compensate for the divide as Rifkin describes it:

> While 1/5 of the world's population is migrating to cyberspace and access relationships, the rest of humanity still is caught up in the world of physical scarcity. For the poor, life remains a daily struggle for survival....Their world is far removed from fiber-optic cables, satellite uplinks, computer screens, and cyberspace networks. (13)

In thinking about the writing of a student like Robert Thomas—a first-generation college student with whom I worked while studying a basic writing course at one of Mississippi's state universities—I would add to Rifkin's discussion members of the working class who are not necessarily poor but who do not possess the same types of computer knowledge nor the same types of networks and networking skills as their middle-class college peers.

My aim here is not to review the important scholarship in our field on computers and composition. Rather, what I wish to focus on and to draw from Rob's experience is the ways in which it suggests the need for composition instructors to design assignments and classroom activities that foster networking across social class divisions. Such a pedagogy must emphasize, as LeFevre has suggested, that invention is a social act. LeFevre asserts that "Invention becomes explicitly social when writers involve other people as collaborators, or as reviewers whole comments aid in invention, or as 'resonators' who nourish the development of ideas" (2). Yet, as Rebecca Moore Howard, Lisa Ede, and Andrea Lunsford have all noted, collaborative learning theory and pedagogy have not led to wide-spread use of collaboration in the act of writing texts; collaboration is, instead, most often used for peer review of single-authored texts (Howard 61, Lunsford and Ede 431). However, as my observations of Rob Thomas

and his collaboration with fellow basic writing classmate Daniel Paterson demonstrate, peer response groups, alone, cannot provide enough nourishment for the development of ideas. Students may need, as well, the mutual sense of responsibility inherent in collaborative writing in order to more fully develop the networking and negotiating skills that are necessary to compete in a twenty-first century economy.

Involving students in collaboration across social class divisions will not merely benefit students from working-class backgrounds. In the type of networked, connected economy that Rifkin speaks of, the notion of one individual possessing all the knowledge and resources needed to complete a job is a notion that is rapidly becoming obsolete. As Howard notes in her review of scholarship on collaboration, "Scholars recommend the pedagogy of collaborative learning and writing not only because of its epistemological felicities but also because it offers students practice in common forms of work-place writing" (57). In fact, debunking the primarily Western myth of the independent writer/scholar, Patricia Sullivan, Charlotte Thralls, Elizabeth Ervin, and Dana L. Fox have argued that not just work place, but all writing, is collaborative. Therefore, "collaborative pedagogy is not so much an alternative pedagogy as it is an accurate mirroring of the true nature of writing" (Howard 55) and the true nature of work in the new economy.

In *Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy*, Miles Myers provides a useful explanation of why the structure of today's workforce involves more collaborative and negotiation among workers:

> In the old plant, the worker worked alone as an individual with individual responsibilities, and intelligence was defined as entirely an individual matter. In the new plant, each worker is assigned to a team and to a network with distributed responsibilities. Intelligence is now defined as, at least, partially distributed. This shift became necessary because in complex systems where information travels fast, where specialties of knowledge keep increasing, where technology assumes control of various tasks, and where change occurs frequently, problem solving and thinking must be a distributed, collaborative act. (11)

At first glance, this sounds like a model that might be familiar to members of the working class, whose jobs have traditionally involved crews, shifts, and/or teams of workers. Yet, as the work of James Berlin reminds us, the traditional manual labor or Fordist workforce toiling on the same shop floor beside other workers or crew members was not the same thing as what Myers and Rifkin are describing. Explains Berlin, "Fordist work was de-skilled and fragmented into a set of mechanized movements. This made for a rigid division between manual workers and mental workers" (42). Whereas laborers on the shop floor depend on fellow crew or shift members properly performing individual tasks, the nature of their work does not tend to involve the capacity to restructure the nature of the labor in order to, say, improve efficiency.

As Berlin notes, "The Fordist mode of production still survives, of course, but it is rapidly being challenged by the regime of flexible accumulation, or post-Fordism" (43). Likewise, Myers observes that many companies traditionally organized more along the lines of Fordist models have been experimenting with rotational teamwork. Under this model, "all jobs are systematically rotated within the team....This teamwork creates the need for two new skills in the workplace. First, [it] places a new premium on teaching as a skill....Second, [it] places a new premium on interpersonal skills" (11).

Because time does not permit me to discuss all of the essays that Rob wrote, I would like to focus briefly on one assignment that Rob, his instructor Emily Coats, and I all agreed prompted him to produce his most successful text.

Near the end of the semester, I asked Rob which essay he felt he had done the best on, and I asked him to account for that success. With no hesitation, he confirmed that he thought the essay on Greek life that he and Dan had written collaboratively was, by far, the best. I will quote briefly from the assignment: "This paper is a collaborative project, which means that you will work in pairs to plan, research, and write a paper together. The assignment requires you to use field research to write about change." Emily also offered the student the following advice on collaboration:

> Exchange information that will help you to locate each other. Divide field research jobs—have one member survey students on Tuesday and one on Wednesday. Then, decide where you want the writing to take place....Set up a timeline with goals for the project. You might want to split up the writing—have one member writer up the introduction; have the other member make up the charts that will report the field research findings. But you will probably have to spend some time co-writing.

This assignment seemed particularly suited to collaboration, for as Howard suggests, "The collaborative writing assignment should be one that is best accomplished by a group rather than an individual; otherwise, the task is artificial..." (62).

Because Rob and Dan were considering pledging one of the on-campus fraternities, they chose to investigate student opinions regarding local fraternities. As part of our reciprocal research arrangement, I met with Dan and Rob twice during their composing process to offer them feedback.

In that later interview, Rob accounted for the success of his part in the production of that essay, saying that he like the feedback another student could offer. He liked, "Someone telling you if it sounds all right." Rob explained that he hated writing a paper by himself because "it's harder to tell if it sounds right or makes sense or sounds stupid." Asked for clarification on what makes a paper sound stupid, Rob put forth, "You know, poor grammar, sentence fragments."

"Was Dan better at that kind of stuff—at the grammar—than you?" I inquired.

"Yeh, kinda." He thought for a moment and added, "Or, if he wasn't, his dad or his sister was." From discussions with Dan, I learned that during a telephone conversation, Dan's father, who teaches business courses at a community college in New York, had inquired about his son's English class. Dan had told his father something like, "Me and Rob are writing a paper on 'The Likes and Dislikes of Fraternity Life,'" to which Dan's father had replied, "Oh, you mean the common misconceptions that people have about Greeks." Shortly after this conversation, the title of Dan and Rob's essay became, "Common Misconceptions of Greeks." I also knew from conversations with Dan that throughout the semester his sister, who was in college in New York, would offer him feedback on his writing. Here, we

can see that within his own family, Dan has a built in network of people familiar with the conventions of college discourse. Within that network are people who model for Dan networking skills. His father inquires about his schoolwork and offers advice; in turn, Dan learns to seek out and to use the resources of those within his network.

However, Rob's experience is more like that of rhetorician Ann Green, who in the recent collection *Teaching Working Class*, writes of her own relationship with a college discourse that conflicted with the discourse of her working-class farm community: "I couldn't call home and talk about what I was reading or writing" (18).

Once, when I asked Rob if he had ever discussed any of his college writing with his parents, at first he looked at me as if I were crazy. After a moment, he answered, "My dad says to me once in a while, 'Son, you're not goof'n off in school, are you? You don't need to be wast'n your money.'" Rob's father has his own business repairing valves on off-shore oilrigs. It was through working with his father that Rob saved enough money to purchase the Ford F-150 that he sports around campus.

"Would he be upset if you quit?" I wondered.

"No, but my mom would." Rob told me that he had thought about quitting school and going back to work with his father, but he was afraid it would break his mother's heart. His father "would not be upset one way or another, so long as [Rob] wasn't wasting time or money."

It was through his collaboration with Dan that Rob was exposed to the type of networking that involves seeking out those more experienced with a discourse task for ideas and feedback. In fact, although it was understood as part of our reciprocal relationship that I would make myself available to Rob to work with him on any writing assignment, it was always I who sought out Rob to set up times to meet to help him brainstorm or to review his drafts. On the other hand, Dan openly and aggressively sought out my help, making such imperative statements as, "Jen, let's meet at the same time on Thursday. By then, I should have finished my rough draft." It was only after my work with the two together that Rob initiated a meeting with me.

It is also important to note that the first time that Rob ever used the word *work* in conjunction with his writing was during that conversation about his and Dan's collaboration. He told me that he and Dan "worked really hard on that paper." The two "worked together outside of class three times," he revealed. Their research consisted of interviews with the Pan Hellenic president (Dan's idea); consultations of the *Pan Hellenic Handbook* and *Webster's New World Dictionary*; surveys of both Greek and non-Greek students (conducted, as Emily had advised, by splitting up the interview days between them); and an interview with Dan's girlfriend (a member of one of the campus sororities)—all of which were referenced within their essay.

In addition to their meeting with me, they also took a draft to the university's Writing Center for feedback—again, Dan's idea. While we could certainly assume that such services as offered in writing centers are always available to all students, Rob's experience suggests that merely announcing those services does not necessarily make them available to working-class students. Without an understanding that going to the writing center is a form of networking and without a model of the value of such collaboration, working-class students like Rob will likely not feel comfortable or see the value of seeking out such feedback. Therefore, it seems that there is much merit in setting up assignments that offer students the opportunity to collaborate with other students, whose contacts and networks can only extend their combined resources. After all, it was through Rob's work with me that Dan was exposed to my feedback; thus, Dan's own network was expanded, as well.

In their introduction to *Writing With: Toward New Identities for Students and Teachers*, Thomas Fox, David Bleich, and Sally Barr Reagan announce: "We are trying to view collaboration as an *underlying orientation* that could help students and teachers create interpersonal contacts of such range and consequence that schools may become…the sites of nurturance and cultivation hitherto expected only from privileged nuclear homes" (5). I agree with these authors that collaboration might be seen "as more of a new reality than as a solution to old problems" (6). While we still need to address and attend to the potential for collaboration to lead to unproductive and oppressive consensus, as compositionists we have

a responsibility to design assignments that foster the types of networking and negotiation skills that are rapidly becoming necessity in all facets of the new networked economy.

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